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ABSTRACT

Because of the perception that the humanities lack practical application to real problems and issues of many adults, they tend to be neglected in adult and continuing education programs/courses. In reality, the humanities can offer insight into the ways people view and interpret life's events. Several major trends in continuing education suggest a ready and eager market for program offerings in the humanities, including the trend toward physical decentralization of many colleges and universities, increasing reliance on technology, growing awareness of the global dimensions of virtually every discipline, and societal changes such as an aging population and changing lifestyles and family structures. Four general types of continuing education programs in the United States offer learners a number of options for exploring the humanities: credit and degree programs, noncredit programs, extension programs that include distance learning, and public programs. Available literature includes a number of recommendations for incorporating humanities into continuing education program offerings. Planners considering expanding humanities-related offerings must consider the culture settings of their institutions, demographics, and the goals for continuing liberal education. Gaining faculty support is also essential to program success as are collaboration and commitment at the faculty and institutional level. (MN)

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DIGEST
NO. 145

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

The Place of the Humanities in Continuing Higher Education

by Bettina A. Lankard

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The humanities tend to be neglected in adult and continuing education programs and courses. A major contributor to this neglect is the perception that the humanities are primarily for personal enrichment and lack practical application to real problems and issues of interest to many adults. In reality, the humanities can offer insight into the ways people look at and interpret life's events. This *ERIC Digest* describes the role of the humanities in adult learning and ways continuing higher education providers can use the humanities to enrich their program offerings.

Current Context of the Humanities

Since the 1970s, education has increasingly focused on the teaching and learning of competencies related to vocational-technical occupations and the professions. However, as the next millennium approaches, the ability to analyze information and solve problems, the flexibility to cope with change, and the skill to communicate effectively in a culturally diverse workplace will assume equal importance. Liberal education can contribute to growth in these areas and bring new dimensions to individuals' insight, understanding, flexibility, and tolerance (O'Brien 1986).

Some of the major trends in continuing education suggest that there is a ready and eager market for program offerings in the humanities (House 1991):

- Colleges and universities are becoming physically decentralized.
- There is an increasing reliance on technology, which facilitates registration, student advisement, and student coursework.
- Colleges and universities are becoming more aware of the global dimensions of virtually every discipline and of the relevance of courses in second languages, multicultural understanding, and anthropology.
- Societal changes—aging population, life-styles, family structure, and so forth—enhance the importance of lifelong learning.
- The numbers of part-time and older learners are continuing to grow.

The accessibility and relevance of educational programs are two factors enticing many adults to resume their learning. Some adults who are challenged by the events surrounding them pursue continuing education programs to gain greater self-awareness and insight into the world in which they live. Others, previously lost to higher and secondary education because of family poverty, war, negative educational experiences, limited gender-based expectations, and so forth, now have opportunities to extend their learning experiences (Bowl 1992). Many who attended college and earned bachelor's degrees without taking courses in history, literature, music, or art and are now ready to pursue these subjects for their own satisfaction (Cheney 1989).

Humanities Programs for Adults

Four general types of continuing education programs in the United States offer learners a number of options for exploring the humanities: (1) credit and degree programs; (2) noncredit programs; (3) extension programs that include distance learning; and (4) public programs, many of which are funded through private foundations or through federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) or the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Ohio Humanities Council (OHC) is affiliated with and, in part, funded by the NEH. As a statewide nonprofit agency, its mission is to increase the role of the humanities in the public and private lives of Ohio's citizens. Its premise is that "the humanities offer insights into life's essential questions—Who am I? What is my responsibility to other people? How does my life connect with a larger history or culture?" (OHC 1991, p. 1).

The council obtains the support of many community and civic organizations to promote its projects. For example, the "Always a River" project, which drew 38,000 Ohioans from 22 counties along the Ohio River, was supported by many of the communities and organizations devoted to retaining memory of the Ohio River history and culture. Programs funded through the OHC are designed to draw upon the life experiences and interests of adults using history, philosophy, literature, ethics, and other humanities to enlarge the scope of their learning (Gabel 1991).

Humanities for Homeless Women, a pilot project co-sponsored by the Humanities Council and the Pennsylvania Commission for Women, involved 14 women (Native American, Anglo American, and African American) who were residents in YWCA transitional housing. The women read short literary works by authors of similar races and experiences, which led them to identify similarities between themselves and the authors and to share their own stories with others in the class (Baird 1994). The goal of the project was to promote learners' sense of self-awareness, self-esteem, and multicultural identification. As Lynne Cheney put it, "far from being remote and alien to the typical citizen, the humanities are closest to what it means to be human, in that the disciplines of the humanities are concerned with human experience and values" (McIntire 1990, p. 6).

Program Recommendations

A number of recommendations for incorporating humanities into continuing education program offerings appear in the literature. A needs assessment is necessary to identify logistical as well as intellectual needs of diverse learners. Explorations should include a wide range of organizational program offerings, not just those offered by similar institutions. Planners must consider the cultural setting of other institutions in comparison to their own (House 1991).

A review of demographics is also essential. "Although only about 3 percent of senior citizens participate in educational activities today, this is rapidly changing and the rate is growing" (ibid., p. 132). As a group, House states, older learners are—

- most likely to be between 65 and 69 years of age;
- likely to live in 1 of 8 states: California, New York, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas;
- increasingly likely to live in 1 of 5 states: Florida, New Mexico, Arizona, Hawaii, or South Carolina;
- generally less likely to live in metropolitan areas than younger people; and
- likely to engage in education activities in proportion to their previous educational level (p. 133).

The goals for continuing liberal education must be explicitly stated and reflect the importance of liberal learning (ibid., p. 67). Some examples follow:

- Provide exposure to issues in contemporary applied ethics relevant to college-educated adults who are likely to have been away from formal learning for several years.
- Teach adults whose previous education emphasized technical and applied skills the basics of rhetoric.
- Help adults enjoy and appreciate the visual arts by acquainting them with the resources available in the community.
- Teach adults ways that the interconnectedness among various disciplines can be discovered.

Gaining the support of faculty is essential to the success of any humanities program. These faculty must not only believe in the philosophy of humanities education and become involved in promoting its inclusion in program offerings, but must also be equipped to teach and understand the course content. The National Endowment for the Humanities' Division of Education Programs awards grants for such faculty development. One example of an NEH award is "Building Ethical Dialogues among Faculty and across Disciplines," a one-year project conducted by Southern Oregon State Community College. The project supports 15 faculty members in the study of major texts in the humanities from the perspective of the ethical issues they raise.

Outlook for the Humanities

McIntire (1990) describes the success of the Continuing Studies program initiated at Rice University: "The growth of Continuing Studies has been steady. In 1982 we enrolled 2,500 total. This year the total enrollment should be close to 9,000. I think that our growth is an indication of the increased interest in the humanities and awareness of their value. It is also a demonstration of the absolute necessity for enlightened administration" (p. 10). She offers the following recommendations (pp. 11-13):

Collaboration. Historical societies, reading clubs, museums, libraries, music groups, and theatrical groups are all potential collaborators for continuing education programs. Other groups include civic-minded professional people, businesses, university faculty, alumni, and staff. Sometimes, small companies or local community groups are receptive to sponsoring programs; larger communities have other collaborative opportunities that can result in mutual benefit to all. For example, "the Houston Symphony donates tickets to us (Rice University) to give to participants. We help to develop the participants' awareness of classical music . . . they go on to become Symphony subscribers and to take other courses in Continuing Studies" (pp. 11-12).

Commitment. The best faculty should be showcased in continuing studies, thus building an audience of supporters. Learners may not know they need a course that examines critical moments in modern history or that provides reflections on the human spirit in the same way that they know they need a course in financial planning.

Supporting a positive outlook for the humanities is the belief that teaching and learning humanities subjects through continuing education may be one of life's greatest pleasures for those who are teaching as well as those who are learning. "Not only may humanities faculty bring much to adult learners, but they may also learn from the learners as well" (ibid., p. 13).

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